

## Tatler No. 260 and Tristram Shandy

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### Article:

Noses are prominent in Volumes III and IV of *Tristram Shandy* — Tristram's crushed nose, his great-grandfather's short nose, the stranger's attractive nose in "Slawkenbergius's Tale," and a "chapter of noses." Although Swift's bawdy use of ears in *A Tale of a Tub* has been suggested as a possible precedent for this olfactory interest, the essay on noses in *Tatler* no. 260, published on December 7, 1710, also provides an analogue and possible source of this motif in the novel. Like Tristram, Isaac Bickerstaff expresses concern for varied readers, such as "my philosophical friends of the Royal Society," "my learned reader," and "the young men of this town."<sup>1</sup> More closely analogous to *Tristram Shandy* is Bickerstaff's fond hope that "Notwithstanding that there is nothing obscene in natural knowledge, and that I intend to give as little offence as may be to readers of a well-bred imagination, I must, for my own quiet, desire the critics (who in all times have been famous for good noses) to refrain from the lecture of this curious tract."<sup>2</sup> In chapter xxxi of Volume III Tristram similarly draws attention to possible bawdiness by declaring his dependence upon "the cleanliness of my reader's imaginations." After "beseeching" his reader to guard against double entendre, Tristram concludes: "For by the word *Nose*, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word *Nose* occurs — I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less."<sup>3</sup>

Like *Tristram Shandy*, *Tatler* no. 260 contains varied lore about noses. Bickerstaff presents his own tradition of learned wit, associating the essay with Montaigne on thumbs and Swift on ears and including quotations on noses from Martial, Ovid, Plautus, and Samuel Butler. He paraphrases an Italian burlesque about venereal disease and tells a story about Tagliacozzi, a renowned "clap doctor" also mentioned in *Tristram Shandy* (in Volume III, chapter xxxviii). The facetious "general precept" which concluded Bickerstaff's essay — "to regard every town-woman as a particular kind of siren, that has a design upon their noses" — is well illustrated by the passionate attention of the women of Strasbourg to the stranger's nose in "Slawkenbergius's Tale."<sup>4</sup>

*Tatler* no. 260, co-authored by Steele and Addison, is not characteristic of the periodical's humor or earnestness. It seems more a playful diversion than a warning against sexual license. Indeed, Esther Johnson suspected that Swift was the paper's author, for he assured her "You are mistaken in your guesses about *Tatlers*: I did neither write that on Noses nor Religion."<sup>5</sup> But her faulty attribution is suggestive about the relationship between the essay and *Tristram Shandy*, because of its use of the kind of innuendo more usually associated with Swift than the *Tatler*. Although we cannot prove that Sterne read the essay, despite the continued popularity and availability of the *Tatler*, he did list Addison and Steele, along with Swift, Pope, and Prior, as the "men of wit and genius" of the preceding generation.<sup>6</sup> Its somewhat ribald account of noses makes Bickerstaff's Lucubration a likely antecedent of this subject in Tristram's *Life and Opinions*.

### Notes:

1. *The Tatler*, ed. George Aitken (New York, 1899), IV, 321, 322, 326.
2. *The Tatler*, IV, 320.
3. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. James A. Work (New York, 1940), p. 218.
4. *The Tatler*, IV, 326; see *Tristram Shandy*, pp. 253-256.
5. *Journal to Stella*, ed. Harold Williams (Oxford, 1948), I, 150.
6. *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Lewis P. Curtis (Oxford, 1935), 304.